Joyful Christmas!

by Margaret Drury Gane

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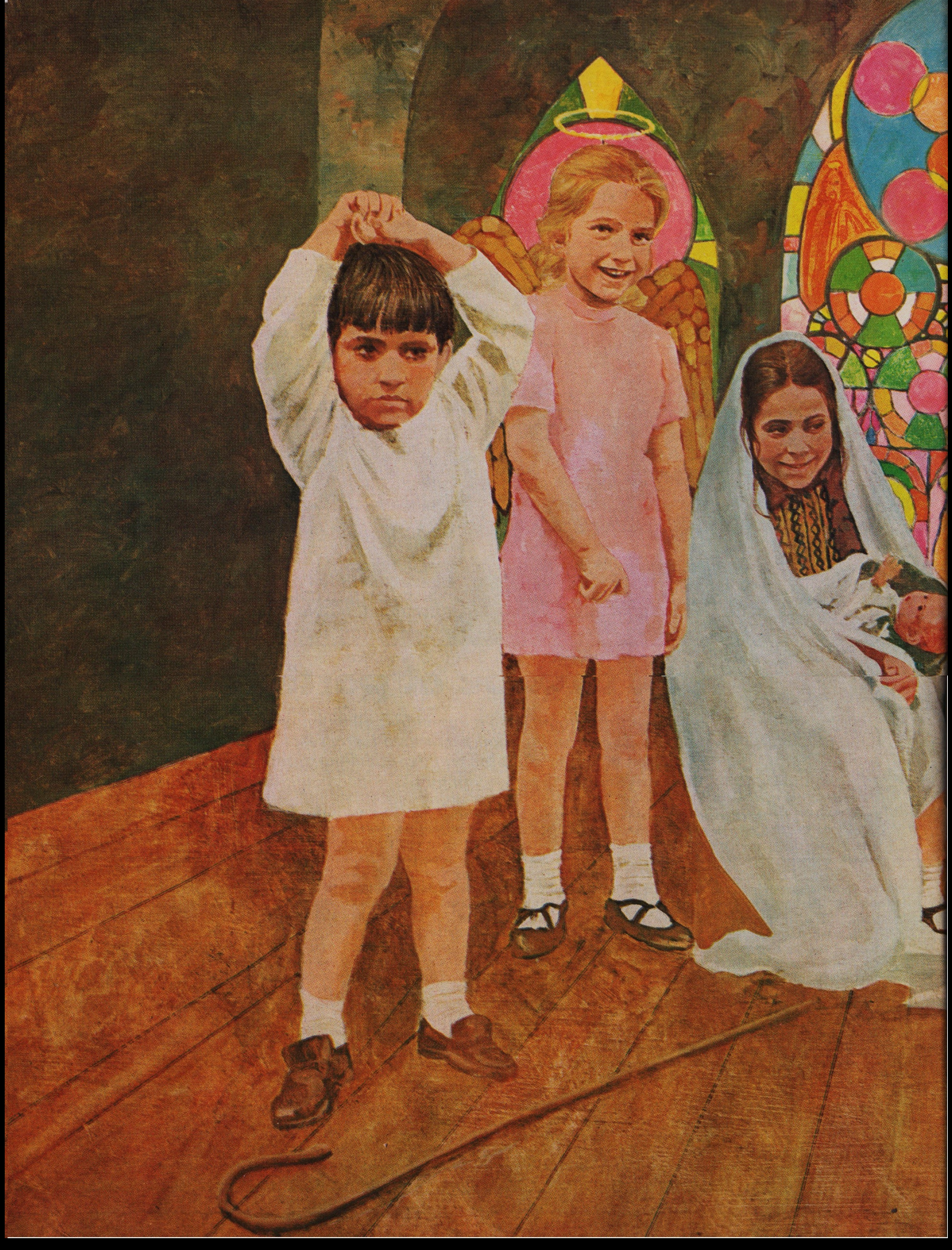

Joyful Christmas!

That's the way it's supposed to be—except for misguided mothers who have to work on pageants, gifts, lists, food, relatives and all the rest, Sara thought sourly. But she was wrong, wasn't she?

BY MARGARET DRURY GANE

"You'll love every minute of it," lied the harried voice at the other end of the phone. "Really! When we get the whole thing together, you'll find it's worth every minute of your time."

Sara Sprinter glanced down helplessly at the family bulldog, as if he might supply her with a fast believable reason for saying no. Christmas, from her past experience, was usually a six-week compression of Things To Be Done, families to decide between, steering wheels to grip. Continued on page 56

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and children to try and decelerate.

"Just three nights?" The voice was reaching now.

Sara remembered her own shy attempts at assembling volunteer help, the myriad of imaginative excuses, none of which would come to her rescue now. Beside her, on the stove, a chocolate pudding was blowing its lava-like bubbles.

"Sure," she said, trying to sound as though it were her own idea. "Sure, I'll help out. Just a second, will you, while I turn off the stove?" When she returned, her caller's tone of voice had taken a definite upward turn.

"Great! Marvelous!" Sara envisioned a vast triumphant check beside her name. "Look, there's just one hour for makeup instruction the Sunday afternoon before . . . that's the twentieth, I guess. Ever applied a beard, Mrs. Sprinter? No? Well, don't worry. Dress rehearsal at seven o'clock on the twenty-first, and the two nights of the pageant itself."

"Could you tell me what I might be doing?" asked Sara.

"Probably Joseph. There's the Centurion, too, but we usually give him to someone more experienced with makeup. He has the body to consider, too. Legs and arms. It's almost funny the way the girls in the cast go for him every year . . ."

They both laughed, simultaneously recalling their own girlhood Roman idols, before whom all Christians and row upon row of young female moviegoers trembled.

"I know it's an imposition at this time of the year," her caller was explaining, "but we're so grateful to have anyone say yes. I'll see you at the makeup meeting, then?"

"Yes, fine. I've marked down the dates. I'll be there."

After the conversation, Sara had some misgivings about her decision, feeling a little like someone who had just signed up for a set of encyclopedias. She didn't really want them . . . and her name would be on their calling list for years.

Dinner time at the Sprinters' never quite attained the artfully organized, color-co-ordinated simplicity Sara saw so often spread before her in the pages of home magazines. Five of them sat at the table, three children and two adults tossed together like a random natural salad, a haphazard accident of genes, with no built-in guarantees that they would always enjoy each other's company. Perhaps this most particularly affected ten-year-old Alexandra . . . Sandy, by choice . . . who vied with her two brothers from the bottom rung of her place in the family. It was evident now in the way in which she announced her news.

"I'm going to be a Bethlehem girl." It was lost in the clink and clatter of cutlery.

"*I'm a Bethlehem girl, I said.*"

Sam, seventeen last August, decided to be kind. "What's a Bethlehem girl, anyway?"

"In the pageant, nut!" Sandy replied. "Jane's one, too, and two other girls."

By this time, her brother Karl had doubled himself up in a good imitation of helpless laughter, derision having become a temporary way of life for him, at least toward his sister. He was two years older than she, a time lapse which, relatives had declared to Sara, would ensure years of "fun together." Sara hoped that they would manage a Christmas truce.

"What would you know, dozey! You never join anything!"

"Who'd *want* to? A Bethlehem girl! I can just see you prancing around, trying to look holy . . ."

"That will be *enough!*" Craig Sprinter's command rang now sharply through the room. *He* had had enough, since the office had been one long situation comedy all day, with much the same in-fighting he was witnessing now. He drew a deep, now-let's-all-relax breath, turning in the uncomfortable silence to his daughter.

"Well, honey, you're in the pageant, eh? What do you do?"

"We sing a lot, and stand by the crib at the end. The dresses are turquoise, and long, too. Did you know Mom was helping with the makeup?"

Craig sent a supportive smile across the table to his wife.

"Yes, that's great. If she's as good at that as she is at cooking . . ."

It was meant to be complimentary, of course; but for reasons she could not define, Sara instead felt a curious, smothering sensation, as though someone had placed a warm sponge over her face. There was no anger, only a cool detachment to the Christmas approaching, the pageant, even to this family who so often seemed to judge her by standards of food, and clothes, and dust-free furniture. Sensing her mood, the family complimented her on the casserole, the vegetables, the chocolate pudding, until they had exhausted their good intentions and left the table, one by one.

Along with her husband over coffee, Sara offered a mixture of apology and explanation. Something in Craig's resigned, gentle greyness, a slump in his shoulders that could not be disguised under the wonders of a permanent-press jacket, minimized her own moodiness. His day had been rotten. Hers had been not good, not bad, just a day. His problems at work would be resolved by the combined efforts of everyone there. She would have to solve hers alone.

AROUND EIGHT O'CLOCK the same evening, Sam's friends arrived to work on the school newspaper, clumping their feet in the small front hallway and discarding fringed windbreakers, army greatcoats emblazoned paradoxically with peace symbols, all beaded with bits of melting snow.

"Interesting bunch," Craig Sprinter commented from his corner of the chesterfield, privately relieved that he wouldn't have to make conversation with them. He shook out the wrinkles from his newspaper and recalled his own adolescence.

"Do you know they still hang up their socks at Christmas?" Sara was saying.

"Who?" Craig was still mired back in the forties.

"The 'interesting bunch' . . . the *boys*."

"They do?" It shouldn't have

surprised him, because an old red felt stocking with the word DAD stitched in green would hang on their fireplace Christmas Eve. "Oh, by the way, let's have Uncle Murray over for dinner soon, okay? Ask Vera, too, but you know her usual answer."

"She never comes," pronounced Sandy, spread-eagled on the rug over the comic section. "And I happen to know why."

Craig and Sara exchanged glances.

"Remember the day I stayed at their place? Well, Aunt Vera told me it was a change for her when she can be alone. Mom, is she Uncle Murray's wife, or girl friend or what?"

"No, honey. When Uncle Murray and his wife lived in England, they heard that Vera had no parents, and they took her in. She was to help out around the house . . ."

"A maid?"

"Well, I know it sounds terrible to you, but things were done that way then."

She felt her daughter's young outrage, and added lamely, "They adopted Vera legally just before coming to Canada. After Murray's wife died, Vera stayed on to take care of him."

"Well," said Sandy, "if you guys think she likes it, you sure are wrong. That day I was there, she showed me all her plants. She said that she would like to have been a person who experiments with flowers . . ."

TIME SEEMED TO TELESCOPE, as December plunged everyone into its own unique contradictions: endless inky nights, each increasingly spattered with colored lights; store staffs, now half mad with a thousand customer hands thrusting merchandise at them, managing to help more readily than they did the rest of the year.

"It's all madness . . . madness," Uncle Murray observed, tilted slightly backwards in the armchair. He had demolished dinner an hour earlier, firing the food into his mouth between sloshes of wine, long past the age where manners slowed up any natural enjoyment of the meal. As Craig had predicted, Vera had elected to miss the dinner, deciding instead to use the free hours for late shopping.

The old man leaned a bit forward, wiry white eyebrows closing ranks over his long nose as he watched Karl putting together an elaborate jigsaw puzzle across the room.

"Nothing like that when I was young, er . . . Karl." He still stammered over German names, his old, British blood forbidding new and friendlier feelings, even at ninety-three. To him, borders were still borders, and the rusty hatreds hung like barbed wire on his mind.

"Some more port, Uncle?"

"Half a glass, thanks, Craig. No, Christmas then was a simple affair. Not much of anything. One year, I recall, I got two toy soldiers, and that was it. Think it might have been the year of Queen Victoria's Jubilee." His eyes, rheumy and misted, seemed to search back long years for the rigid lead companions who made a sombre childhood more bearable. For a moment, only Sara's knitting needles clacked in the quiet.

"I'm helping with the pageant this year," she said with false brightness.

"Ah well," replied her uncle, without interest, "Ah well. A pageant, eh? Are you Mary?"

Sara dropped a stitch. "Nothing quite that heady. Young people do all the parts, and I'll help them make up." But he did not appear to understand what she meant, and turned his attention to Sandy, who had come in to say goodnight. As she stood before Uncle Murray, dutifully geared for the usual sand-dry kiss, the young girl noticed his transparent, wrinkled, mottled skin. He was *so* old, and as fragile as a blown-glass figurine. Instinctively kind, Sandy was suddenly the victim of torn loyalties, as she remembered her leaning toward Vera's cause. A kind of impulsive guilt made her blurt out:

"I have a Christmas present for you, Uncle Murray!" She didn't, but she'd think of something, something maybe that no one else could possibly give him.

"And I have one for you, too, Alexandra." She had been named after his wife, and he loved to use it. "Promise me you'll open it where there's lots of light. That's all I'm going to tell you."

Later in the evening, after the old man had enjoyed tea, crackers and cheese, the front door jangled open, bumping Pickwick, their English bulldog.

"It's me!" shrilled Vera, shrimp-cheeked with cold. "Wups, I'm afraid I hit old Pickwick! Sorry, boy. Lord, what an ugly face. And he smells like wet oatmeal."

"He's been out in the snow," Karl said defensively.

"No . . . no tea or anythin', Sara. It's startin' to snow again, and I think we'd best get home. Well, then, Luv, have you warmed up your coat, then?" she called to Murray. Much of her Yorkshire accent had lessened after thirty-five years, but her endearments lay rooted in the moors. "And be sure to muffle your face . . ."

"My *ears*, you mean. My God, to think it comes to this." The old man stood erect very slowly, piece by piece; and everyone stood up with him, as though an anthem were being played.

The evening ended with everyone crammed in the narrow hallway, laughing at nothing and everything, admonishing Vera to drive carefully, until only Craig and Sara remained shivering at the front door.

Just before the final frantic wave, they could hear Vera shouting advice through the car window as she brushed off the snow: "Be sure and put that robe over your knees, Luv!"

And Uncle Murray's surprisingly spirited reply: "Do me a favor, will you, Vera? Put me in a home."

DURING the last few years, Sara had not been keeping up her childhood habit of regular church attendance. For good or ill, the distracting, all-together-now rigidity of formal services left her unsatisfied. But there was a price to pay for heresy, she discovered, as she waited in the basement room of the church for the makeup meeting to begin. She knew no one. There had been the small embarrassment of asking directions within the building itself, a sense of isolation heightened by the easy, familiar banter around her.

A large, fat woman in an orange pantsuit stood up, calling for attention. "Two people are missing, so we'll just have to go on without them, I'm afraid. They were *told* the time," she said, a bit petulantly, as though that were the golden guarantee of promptness.

"We *could* throw them to the lions," suggested a pretty dark-haired woman seated next to Sara. "By the way, I'm Helen Westley. I think Sandy and my daughter know each other."

". . . and now, here is the woman who keeps our pageant rolling so efficiently, Barbara Melton."

A short, slender woman moved

to the centre of the room, like a well-thrown dart; she looked slightly nervous at being in command. Briefly, she outlined their duties, and then introduced Mr. Johnson, who would instruct them on the intricacies of makeup.

"There isn't much to all of this," he began, in a custard-smooth tenor voice. "Whatever experience I gained with D'Oyly Carte — I *won't* tell you how many years ago — I'm only too happy to share with you. Now, let's get to work, shall we?"

He clapped a hand on the shoulder of a young man seated on a metal bridge chair before him.

"George here is to be King Herod. He has kindly volunteered to let me make him up today, to give you an idea of how we go about it."

Within the hour, George sat before them, a Faustian figure caught halfway between youth and age, teen-aged from the neck down. Above his shirt collar was a face weary and hollow-cheeked from years of dissipation and kingly decisions.

"That's incredible!" Sara whispered to Helen. "Do you think we'll be able to manage that?"

Only George's tortured adolescent eyes reminded her how out of place he must feel, pimples tingling under the beard glue, trapped in a room claustrophobic with clashing perfumes and unsettling femininity.

Mr. Johnson was pointing out parts that might be improved upon. "Please, ladies, don't forget the small red dot in the corner of each eye, will you? Otherwise, our players will seem to be cross-eyed to the audience. But, we'll iron all this out at the dress rehearsal tomorrow night."

ON THE WALK home, Sara relished the wintry quiet, the bite of a gathering wind on her cheeks. A blurred, syrupy sun was already on its way down at two in the afternoon.

"Hi, Sara!"

It was Mrs. Tressiter's house, where anything furry, feathered, animal or human was as welcome as a fresh bouquet. As always, Sara found herself cheered by her friend's brisk greeting.

"Hi, yourself!" she said, coming to a halt.

"How goes everything, Sara? Children well? And Craig, the dear man? I haven't seen him in a long while."

"Fine, Liz, thanks . . ."

"And getting excited now, with Christmas so near." Her grey eyes squinted into the sky. "More snow in those clouds, I think. But it's so gorgeous, this weather." She really meant it.

"Yes, I love it. But somehow I seem to be lacking the Christmas spirit this year. I don't even know why. Maybe I'm in a rut." She regretted the small, sour confession as soon as she had said it.

"Look," said Liz, "what you need is a party." She leaned down to stroke her cat, undulating around her ankles, tail clinging as though by static electricity.

"You and Craig drop in Tuesday night, okay? Nothing formal . . . it never is, you remember. Maybe it will help to dispel the December blues. Maybe not. But at least it's better than putting up with them alone. Will you come?"

"Of course we will. Craig may be there before me, but I'll come over right after the pageant."

"Doesn't matter what time you get here. Just come and be merry!"

IT WAS MONDAY NIGHT, December 21, and the dress rehearsal had ended some two hours ago. Sara lay quietly in bed, glad in a way that Craig would be late, for she was aware tonight of two distinct emotions wrestling for her favor. One had been with her for weeks, a kind of unshakable blue mood that persisted through the carol playing, the shopping, the intensified excitement of the children. She remembered reading somewhere that such depression was not unusual at Christmas, and she leaned on the explanation gratefully. So many ghosts, lightly dismissed the rest of the year, were revived at the sight of the decorated tree, or the sound of music someone close to you had loved.

The other emotion had been evoked by the dress rehearsal itself. In a way, she supposed, it was like hearing an old joke the twelfth time . . . it just shouldn't be funny. Helen had called it "a religious disaster, visited upon us for trying to re-enact something too good for us." She may have been right, because certainly no one was spared.

First, the elaborate headdress of a Wise Man had toppled to the stage floor during his dignified bow, causing an epidemic of giggles to sweep through the entire cast. Moments later, Herod's beard, too hastily glued, swung crazily to the left, then hung forlornly, like a dead squirrel. Lights had dimmed and turned a hideous green just as the choir began, How Brightly Beams The Morning Star. And when Joseph, *her* Joseph, stepped forward to deliver his memorable line: "And He shall be called — *Wonderful!*" a voice suddenly falsetto with fear gave it an ingratiating, Liberace-like inflection.

Sara smiled to herself, and reached over the night table to turn out the lamp. It was then that she saw the note from Sandy, quickly scrawled and unpunctuated:

"Hi Mom is this all right for Uncle Murray's Christmas present"

Under the note was a homemade card, complete with felt-pen drawings of an old man, a stiff young soldier hung with large medals, and a queen who looked more like a fashion doll than the famous old woman it was meant to represent. In the centre of the card, Sandy had printed her poem:

I never wanted to
grow old,
And leave the Christmas I know now,
Until I saw, Dear
Uncle Murray —
that life is never in a
hurry,
that even men of
ninety-three
can have fun by the
Christmas tree.
Good for you! Excelsis
Gloria!
You're the only person I know
Who saw Queen
Victoria!

Sara held it for a few moments, rereading it, well aware of the long, pencil-sucking, frustrating hours it would take her daughter to manage even this much. She could have as easily bought something; but Sandy never took the easy way. Whatever she said or did seemed to bear her own unique stamp. Somehow, please God, let her keep that.

The tension hit Sara the moment she entered the makeup room on Tuesday evening. It bristled with activity, with boy carolers, and at least twenty-five girls in various states of angelic transformation flitting around the slowly bronzing Centurion.

Before the table marked MARY, a young girl was staring into the mirror, face screwed up in mock dismay. "My *eyebrows*!" she moaned, "Just look at them!"

"Elizabeth Taylor has thick eyebrows," Helen Westley was saying helpfully, dabbing at the girl's cheeks with pale rouge.

Sara discovered that Billy Dearborn, who was Joseph, had not yet

arrived, so she helped to make up the carolers, compellingly scruffy little fellows who shoved each other around.

"Isn't Bill here yet?" Barbara Melton was rasping close to her ear, hoarse with laryngitis.

"No, and I'm getting worried. I'm not all that good at this make-up job."

"You're fine," croaked Barbara, matter-of-factly. "But you really have to put the fear of God into these guys if you want them here on time."

Above them, they could hear the organ beginning, O Come, All Ye Faithful.

O come, Billy Dearborn, Sara was praying.

"It's like heaven gone mad, isn't it?" called Helen. "Is Billy not here *yet*?"

"No, damn it."

"Watch it. Lightning will strike." As Helen spoke, a tall, pale figure burst through the door.

"Billy!"

Just as Sara started to smear on the basic makeup, the stage director appeared, a slight sharp terrier of a man who, it appeared, could bark at friends as well as strangers.

"*Ten minutes!* I want *everyone* up there in *ten minutes!*"

Sara looked at Billy, then at the director. With a delicious sense of righteous anger, and Sandy's eyes watching for her reaction from across the room, she said, "If it takes *eleven* minutes, or *fifteen* minutes, Joseph is going to look right." And, to her own amazement, added, "Go tell them to sing another carol."

IT WAS PRECISELY at the same time Sara was finishing Joseph's makeup, that Uncle Murray began the wrapping of his gift to Sandy. At his advanced age, it was a tortuous, finger-wracking business, but he wanted to do it alone. He peered down at the lovely thing in the palm of his hand, and his head swam with remembrances of the first Alexandra, who wore this brooch after the death of his mother. It was deeply engraved gold, in the shape of a lily of the valley, its flowers and tiny leaves formed by seed pearls and jade. How often those bits of jade had been reflected back at him by the young girl's green eyes! No one else should have it, he thought. He didn't think that his wife would mind.

HELEN AND SARA slipped quietly into the back of the church, both wondering if the chaos of last night would be repeated, but as scene after scene unfolded, miracles happened. Or *appeared* to happen, and that was good enough. Down the aisle, in their own windbreakers and bright wool caps, walked the carolers, their fresh wild voices bouncing back from the church walls in untrained exuberance. During the shepherd tableau, a little lad sang his song so sweetly that nothing moved during it but the candle flames. Mary, momentarily at peace with her eyebrows, and suddenly inspired by her role, made her scene with the angel a triumph of insight. And to Sara's delight, good old Billy Dearborn, helped, she preferred to believe, by her professional makeup job, became a mystical, towering figure of strength.

"It's different tonight."

"It always is," replied Helen. "By tomorrow night, they'll be so good at it we'll have a humility problem on our hands!"

Almost nine o'clock, and the final scene. A triumphant procession, candles in hand, circled the entire church, moving at last down the centre aisle to form an arc around the manger. The magi in vivid purple, scarlet and gold; the burlap-robed shepherds, carrying stuffed toy lambs; the Bethlehem girls in pale apricot and turquoise, eyes darting occasionally to find their parents in the audience; and behind them all, the icicle glitter of the angel choir, like one vast hopeful star.

"Silent night, holy night . . ."

Whatever tensions, frustrations, loneliness, boredom or disbelief the audience brought with them melted before the young optimism. The curtain slowly closed, and a young boy with red hair and blue eyes stepped between them to the front of the stage.

"This," he declared loudly and solemnly, rigid with concentration, "has been *our* gift to you . . ." He was putting careful emphasis in all the right places, having practiced it in the kitchen for weeks. "For Christmas is not just for children. It is for anyone who wants to listen."

IT WAS A MAGIC white night, stingingly cold, with a chandelier of stars above. With Sandy beside her, Sara kicked through the snow, glad to be going to a party, feeling an airiness and light vigor she had not known for weeks. The pageant, she knew, was only really an illusion; and the angels on stage became annoyingly, endearingly human down in the basement of the church. Or was it possible that it was the other way around? It didn't matter. What mattered was that she had managed, at least for a while, to discard the dark, heavy mood. Ahead of them was the Tressiter house, glowing from every window now, filled to the brim, Sara remembered from other years, with all the goodwill anyone could hope for. There would be pine boughs, warm food, a punch bowl with its tipsy slices of orange and lemon, the cat curled in feline aloofness on the piano top . . .

Sandy ran up the path, reaching the porch before her.

"Hey, Mom! They're singing in there. Can you hear it?"

"You bet I can! Shall we go in and show them how?"

Across the icebound lawn, Sara recognized Craig's rich baritone, freed once or twice a year from the shower stall, singing lustily and perhaps a bit prophetically:

"Gaw-dan-sinners re-con-ciled!"

END